FORT MCKINLEY,
BATTERY HONEYCUTT OBSERVATION STATION
On east side of East Side Drive approximately
225 feet south of Cove Side Drive
on Great Diamond Island
Portland
Cumberland County
Maine

HAER No. ME-59-C

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Northeast Region
Philadelphia Support Office
U.S. Custom House
200 Chestnut Street
Philadelphia, P.A. 19106

HAER
ME
3-PORT,
27C-

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Location:

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Portland, Cumberland County, Maine

UTM: 19.403050.4837030
Quad: Portland East, ME, 1:24.000

Date of Construction:

1905 and 1909

Architects & Engineers:

Army Corps of Engineers

Present Owners:

McKinley Partners Limited Partnership

Present Use:

Vacant

Significance:

Fort McKinley attains significance as the largest of Portland Harbor's five military complexes built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The fort protected Maine's principal city with one of the most well-defended harbors in the country. Battery Honeycutt Observation Station is one of seven such stations built at Fort McKinley between 1905 and 1909 to control and monitor gun fire from the fort's large batteries.

Project Information:

This is one of nine structures at the fort to be documented in accordance with the Memorandum of Agreement of 1989 as a mitigative measure prior to partial demolition of the structure.

Christine S. Beard
Tremont Preservation Services
10 Barr Street
Salem, MA 01970

SITE

Fort McKinley occupies the northern half of Great Diamond Island in Maine's Casco Bay and is a part of the City of Portland. The Battery Honeycutt Observation Station is located on the South Fork of the island within bounds of Fort McKinley. It is set close to the road in a wooded area on the east side of East Side Drive, approximately 225' south of Cove Side Drive, just south of Battery Honeycutt.

DESCRIPTION

Battery Honeycutt Observation Station is in very poor condition, with all but the south corner (of the 1909 section) having collapsed. The building was constructed in two sections, the earliest being a square section in the east corner that was constructed in 1905. The remainder was added in 1909.

The earlier section measures roughly 16' 3" square. It is partially set into a manmade hillside so that it is fully exposed at the southwest side but only the upper half is visible from the northeast side. Walls of the 1905 section are constructed of brick at the southwest and northwest elevations. The lower portions of the northeast and southeast elevations are also brick but the upper half are of poured concrete. The building rests on a concrete foundation. Fenestration consists of a central doorway flanked by two windows at the southwest elevation and one window centered on the northwest elevation. There is also a single long narrow window running along the width of both the northeast and southeast elevations at eye level (from the interior). The doorway is topped by a rough-cut granite lintel as is the window at the west elevation where there is also a rough-cut granite sill. The two windows at the south elevation are small square windows framed by molded wood trim. Instead of sash, these two contain interior wood shutters made up of diagonal boards. Similarly, the narrow windows at the northeast and southeast elevations have interior wood shutters and appear not to have been glazed at all. The door is missing from the entry. No sash remains in the west window although it appears to have contained a wood double-hung sash. The structure is enclosed by an unusual roof system consisting of concrete trusses infilled with rows of purple glass cylinders. On the interior, the 1905 section has a combination of exposed brick and rough-plastered walls, a concrete floor, and the exposed ceiling system just described. The door and window openings are framed by molded wood trim.

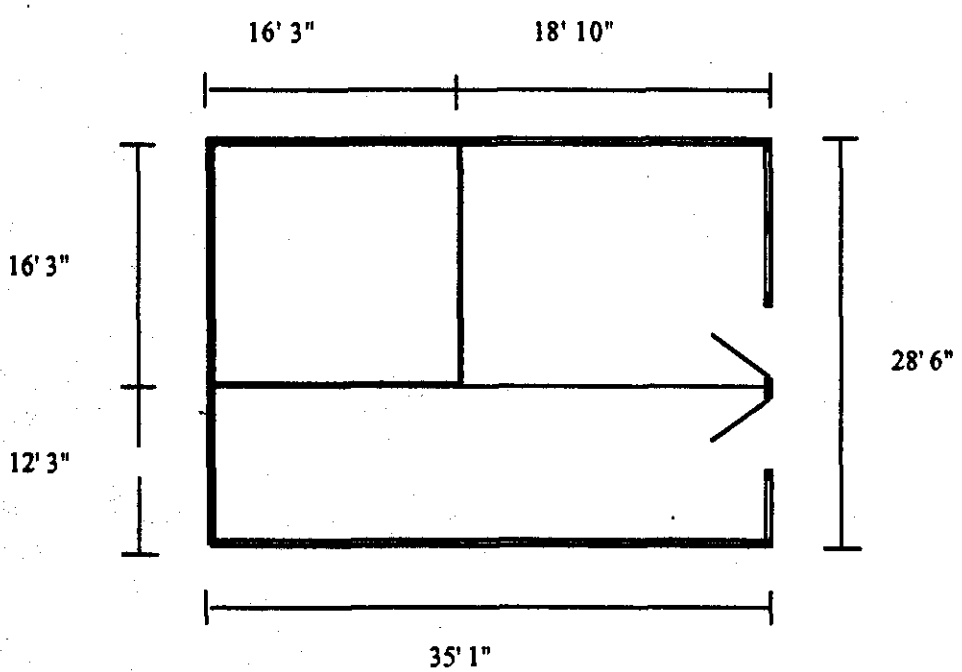
The 1909 addition had an L-shaped plan (see sketch map for dimensions). It was built using the Sewell method of construction. This technique uses cement plaster over steel mesh on a wood or steel frame. These buildings had concrete foundations and the unpainted exterior took on a cream or light tan color. According to the original plans, the addition was enclosed by a very shallow hip roof. If it was like other similar structures at the fort, the roof was finished with tar & gravel. The addition included two rooms: one along the northwest side of the building and another in the south corner. There were two entries to the addition, both on the southwest wall. Access to these was gained by means of a steep narrow concrete stair leading up from the road. According to plans, these entries contained five-panel wood doors. Other fenestration on the addition consisted of five windows along the northwest elevation, two at the northeast elevation, three at the southwest elevation and a tripartite window at the southeast elevation. These windows contained 6/6 double-hung wood sash. Only a small section of wall in the south corner of the building (about 15' in length) remains standing. Due to the severely deteriorated condition of the addition, original interior finishes cannot be determined. Based on other buildings of the same style and type, the interior most likely had hardwood floors, rough plaster floors and tongue & groove board or pressed metal ceilings. Window and doors were probably framed by molded wood trim.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Establishment of Fort McKinley was part of a larger effort by the government to provide strategic harbor defenses throughout the country, a practice begun in the late eighteenth century. Fort McKinley was the largest of four new fortifications established to protect the many avenues of entry into Portland Harbor at the turn-of-the-century. It was situated to deter entrance into the harbor from the north, particularly by way of Hussey Sound and Broad Sound. Plans for Fort McKinley included construction of nine gun batteries and facilities to mine the two major channels. To help control and monitor the firing of the guns, each battery had an observation station constructed nearby. These stations provided both range and directional information to the batteries. Battery Honeycutt Observation Station is one of five such stations built at Fort McKinley in 1905 (two others were built in 1908). This station served nearby Battery Honeycutt which held two 8 inch breechloading rifles mounted on disappearing carriages.

In 1905, under President Theodore Roosevelt, a board was appointed to evaluate the country's defenses. The Taft Board, headed by Secretary of War William H. Taft, made recommendations to improve the existing system for controlling the guns and mines. Rather than sighting guns directly, the board proposed to use a sophisticated observation system with optical instruments in the observation stations. Sightings would be sent by telephone into plotting rooms where the data was processed. In turn, ranges and directions were sent to the batteries. In response to the Taft Board recommendations, an addition was constructed onto Battery Honeycutt Observation Station to supplement the existing operating room. The addition included a plotting room (south corner room) and dormitory (northwest room).

During WWII the Navy also established a strong presence in Portland Harbor, sharing responsibility for defense of the area with the Army. The Navy undertook a number of measures to supplement the work of the Army, including rigging submarine nets and sinking old ships between the islands and the mainland to completely enclose the harbor. By doing this, the batteries and mine casemates on the north and east shores of Fort McKinley were rendered superfluous. Consequently, only one battery at Fort McKinley needed to be manned. By 1943, as the threat of a major attack became unlikely, build-up of the coastal defenses greatly diminished and were virtually halted by 1940. Experiences during WWII, such as amphibious landings, air strikes, and the development of nuclear weapons and missiles all contributed to making harbor defenses like Fort McKinley obsolete. In 1950 the Coast Artillery was dissolved, the U.S. Army harbor defense commands were disbanded, and the forts were abandoned.



Observation Station, Battery Honeycutt
Floor Plan
[not to scale]

Battery Honeycutt Observation Station
Original Plan at National Archives (file no. DR 10-79-51)